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# **Crossing Borders and Crossing Minds: The Influence of Public Perception on US Immigration Policy**

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## Abstract

A strong connection between public opinion on immigration in the United States and changes in immigration policy is well-established in migration-related literature. Not much research, however, has been conducted on the differential impacts of pro-immigration and anti-immigration aggregate opinion. Does pro-immigration public opinion affect immigration policy in the United States to the same extent as anti-immigration public opinion? I hypothesize anti-immigration public opinion will translate to a greater number of restrictive policies than pro-immigration public opinion translates to liberal policies. Through assessing correlations between shifts in public opinion and policies implemented, this study shows negative shifts in public opinion correspond with a greater number of restrictive immigration policies. With the current polarization and securitization of immigration to the United States, understanding the impacts of shifts in public opinion can aid pro- and anti-immigration advocates to leverage public opinion to change policy.

## Introduction

Immigration reform is a polarized hot button topic which is so divisive in American politics that politicians joust to see who can pass the most restrictive immigration bill in Congress (Galston, 2024). Immigration crossings to the United States continue to rise as the issue becomes more securitized in American politics (Batalova, 2024). Not only do policymakers have strong opinions on immigration, but the American public also harbors strong opinions. Those who feel strongly about their stance, whether it be to support or oppose immigration, will advocate for their opinions to be articulated in federal and state policy.

Aggregate public opinion is an important force in shaping policy because policymakers want to appear responsive to their electorate. If policymakers do not respond to their constituents, they will be voted out of office. Adherence to public opinion in this manner is only applicable to liberal democracies, as countries without elections are not subject to the same external pressure to appease the public through elections. Opinions are not stagnant, though. Depending on a variety of social and political conditions, aggregate public opinion supports increased immigration to the United States and opposes it in others. Federal policy then responds to changes in public opinion. Does pro-immigration public opinion affect immigration policy in the United States to the same extent as anti-immigration public opinion?

This study will assess the differential effects of pro- and anti-immigration sentiment on immigration policy in the United States. The connection between public opinion and policy is well-established in public opinion literature, but the differential effects of different sentiments are not. Based on the cognitive biases which attribute negative characteristics to immigrants and immigration, as well as an immigration system which facilitates restriction of immigration above liberalization, anti-immigration public opinion is more likely to translate into policy. By

answering this question, researchers and policymakers can better understand the effects of public opinion and how it can be leveraged to influence policy changes.

This research is significant because the number of migrants globally is rapidly increasing and is expected to increase even more in the upcoming years. Increases are occurring not just for refugees fleeing persecution, but also those who flee economic or climatological hardship or political instability. Even though some migrants' claims are not protected by international law, individuals still migrate regardless of the international systems (or lack thereof) in place to protect them. At the same time as the number of people migrating globally is rising, public opinion of immigrants and immigration is growing more polarized in all countries. Far right parties are capitalizing on fear of newcomers to build support for closing borders and restricting immigration. These conflicting realities have created a global backlog of migrants, yearning for a better life, but are unable to build it in their current country. States cannot ignore migration. They need policies to address mass-migration, whether those policies involve welcoming migrants or fortifying borders.

In response to increased levels of migration, it is also a politically divisive subject. All sides of the political spectrum have strong stances on the issue. Policymakers around the world are facing public backlash from constituents who are unhappy with their country's immigration policies. These feelings have even translated into violence as some individuals attempt to bring an end to an 'invasion' of foreigners. If narratives surrounding immigration are mostly negative, public opinion, and therefore policy is also likely to skew toward restricting immigration. This research can be used to discuss how public opinion affects policy, as well as how public opinion can be manipulated to achieve a specific policy goal. Both pro- and anti-immigration advocates may be interested in manipulating public opinion as migration solutions become more urgent.

Immigration policies in the United States originate from both legislative and administrative sources. Congress passes legislation on immigration, and executive agencies implement regulations to specify different aspects of legislation. This study solely comments on legislation passed by Congress and statues issued by the President. It does not include data on administrative regulations passed by executive agencies.

This paper begins by establishing a foundation of interdisciplinary literature and the frames through which immigration is analyzed. It will then assess how public opinion changes, followed by how public opinion changes policy and policy outcomes. To establish a theoretical framework, I begin by assessing cognitive biases which encourage negative opinions of immigration followed by an assessment of how negative public opinion is articulated in policy. The paper will then assess the results of the study conducted and discuss their implications.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Public opinion has been a common topic of literature for decades, as measurement is relatively straightforward and accessible. Analysis is also made simple by analytic software. Therefore, an abundance of literature focuses on the effects of public opinion on national policy (Wright et al. 1987; Lowery et al. 1989; Herbst, 1993; Burstein, 1998; Burstein, 2003; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010; Soroka and Wlezien, 2012). This literature firmly establishes the link between expression of public opinion and changes in American policy.

Immigration is a less established in the public opinion realm, but still a growing topic in the literature. As immigration becomes a more salient topic in American political and social discourse, scholars have focused more on the migration of people and the effects of movement. Literature focused on immigration is interdisciplinary in nature, with topics ranging from global histories of migration to the economic impacts of migration to specific localities and everything

in between. Much of the literature focuses on drivers of migration and national-level policy responses to mass-migration events (Fetzer, 2000; Castelli, 2018; Clemens, 2020; Demby, 2022). This literature tends to focus on countries in the global North and the impacts immigration has on those countries (Tshimba, 2021).

Although public opinion and immigration are common topics individually in scholarly literature, public opinion of immigration is a less-common topic. A small body of literature exists to apply the connection between public opinion of immigration to national-level immigration policy (Mayda, 2006), but this literature does not examine the differential effects of public opinion which supports and opposes immigration. This study will address this gap in the literature by assessing the heightened significance of negative public opinion over positive opinion in shaping immigration policy in the United States.

### **What Influences Public Opinion?**

Various factors play a large role in influencing public opinion to be more positive or negative toward immigration, and these factors are then translated into federal policies. Media bias, stock and flow of immigrants, and racism all influence how individuals shape their opinions of immigration. The media play a large role in shaping opinions of immigration because media outlets are seen as trusted vessels of information sharing. The majority of media outlets, however, are biased and frame information to perpetuate their institutional bias. CNN frames a relatively sympathetic image of immigrants who enter the United States in pursuit of a better life (Yan et al., 2024), whereas Fox News frames mass-immigration as a Democratic policy failure (Fox News, 2024). As media, especially news media, become more prevalent and omnipresent, biases projected by media outlets become widespread among and beyond their audiences.

The number of immigrants living in and moving to a country also shapes individuals' opinions, as certain individuals' opinions are shaped by their perceptions of immigrants moving to their cities and countries. The number of immigrants living in the country, however, is less consequential in shaping opinion than the perceived number of those moving into the country (Margalit and Solodoch, 2022). This is not only because established populations are integrated into their communities, but also because deportation is a complicated and expensive process. New arrivals signal a failure of border policy in keeping unknown and potentially dangerous individuals out of the country. Controlling the number of new entries is easier and more straightforward than decreasing the number of immigrants living in a country, therefore individuals tend to hold more negative opinions of the act of immigration than they do against the number of immigrants living in the country.

Along with perceptions of stock and flow, racism plays a large role in shaping negative attitudes toward immigrants. Those who are viewed as 'different' in their race, religion, ethnicity, or culture are thought to threaten the racial balance of the country. Those with black and brown skin experience more barriers to immigration than white communities (Demby, 2022). Beyond threatening the racial balance of the country, stereotypes paint immigrants as personally threatening as well. Stereotypes which frame immigrants as 'criminals' or 'rapists' become embedded in the American psyche, and Americans are less likely to support immigration. No matter the truth behind these claims, they shape public opinion, which then translates into national immigration policy.

### *Frames of Analysis*

When forming an opinion of an event or phenomenon, differences in framing by those sharing information affects how the receiver processes information. In terms of migration,



common frames of analysis include morality, labor, and geostrategic incentives/disincentives. Moral framing increases the efficacy of rhetoric in influencing its audience. Moral Foundations Theory posits five universal moral truths as frames of analysis: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Graham et al., 2013). Moral framing can be utilized to target arguments to specific audiences which may resonate more with different moral frames (Hurst and Stern, 2020). By framing their speech through these moral frameworks, information sharers can more easily connect with their audiences and export their ideal message.

Those who do not resonate with moral frameworks may be more easily persuaded by economics. From a microeconomic standpoint, perceptions of the labor market strongly correlate with opinions on migration. If individuals perceive poor economic performance of the country or high unemployment, individuals are more inclined to believe ‘the immigrants are taking our jobs’ because individuals worry a steady stream of low-cost labor will threaten their job security (Fetzer, 2000; Mayda, 2006; Castles et al., 2014; Peters, 2017). Individuals who blame immigration for perceived threats against their household’s economic security are likely to advocate for decreased immigration. Firms, on the other hand, are more open to immigration to increase the supply of low-wage labor as a method to minimize labor costs (Peters, 2017). Immigrants typically demand lower wages than citizens, so firms may lobby for increased immigration to expand the low-wage labor market. In this sense, immigration would be framed positively as a method to keeping firms staffed and prices of goods low.

In addition to economic impacts of immigration, information sharers may also frame immigration through geostrategic incentives and disincentives. Reception of migrants can be used as a tool by governments to strengthen alliances or indirectly condemn adversaries (Long,

2013). Those from allied countries are welcomed to share their cultures and values. Those from non-allied countries may be received as a resistance against the poor sociopolitical climates of enemy countries.

Overall, public opinion is greatly impacted by the primary identity of migrants. Even if they have multiple identities or their movement can be framed through multiple lenses, the main classification frame used affects how they will be received in a community, whether this be positively or negatively. Individual immigrants are often not in control of how they are identified by others, but differential identification affects host communities' opinions on them.

#### *Dual-Securitization of Immigration as a Crisis*

Both pro- and anti-immigration activists engage in securitization of migration for their own benefit. A 'crisis' is a social construct. No situation is a crisis unless and until it is interpreted as one, either by the government, the media, or society as a whole (McDonald, 2008; Castelli Gattinara and Zamponi, 2020). Pro-immigration groups frame immigration as a crisis in which those migrating to the United States are in need of assistance and services to uphold their human security. Anti-immigration activists frame immigration as a crisis in which unprecedented numbers of 'criminals' are entering the United States illegally and negatively impacting the economy and society. By framing immigration as a crisis, they are hoping to build broad public support for their cause and eventually translate their cause into policy change.

The media plays a large role in how events of mass-migration are presented to the public. Different modes of media appear in every aspect of daily life, especially with the use of smart phones and social media. The way in which media outlets portray immigration greatly impacts public opinion and policy. If the media frames migrants as threats to the Western way of life and burdens to the welfare state, then public opinion and policy will follow suit (De Coninck, 2020).

If the media frames migration in a more positive light like it did when Ukrainian refugees and asylum-seekers were forced to flee their homes, then positive responses to immigration in politics and society are more likely. Different outlets promote warring objectives to influence their viewers' thoughts and opinions.

### **Changes in Policy Outcomes**

Public opinion influences policy. When enough constituents make their opinions known, policymakers must respond to their opinions or they risk reelection. Lobbying by special interest groups largely impacts policy because constituents are advocating for their beliefs directly to policymakers. Organized special interest groups make their policy priorities clear and understandable so they can influence policymakers. Special interest groups, however vocal about their beliefs, are not the only group which influences policy. Policymakers must also attend to the beliefs of unorganized constituencies, as most of the electorate is unorganized. If they want to be reelected, they must respond to all their constituents' needs, not just the most vocal constituents.

#### *Special Interest Groups*

Special interest groups exist on all sides of the immigration debate. These groups are particularly important in influencing policy because they organize groups of people to speak directly with policymakers. Firms are important special interest groups because they are financially able to lobby for immigration which suits their needs (Peters, 2017). Firms may lobby to decrease immigration restrictions for unskilled individuals to work in manufacturing or agriculture. Groups may also lobby for increased restrictions to protect American workers from

competition in the job market (Facchini et al. 2011). Because special interest groups have reach and power, they are important voices in amplifying individual opinions.

### *Unorganized Constituencies*

Although special interest groups and other organized groups do hold a great deal of power to influence policy, the needs of unorganized constituencies must still be prioritized by policymakers. To be reelected, elected officials need to gain broad support, not just support from individual groups (Bohmelt, 2021). Therefore, even if constituencies are unorganized or hold less influential power than special interest groups, their votes are still important for policymakers.

Policymakers are also more prone to pay attention to their constituents with more salient issues, whereas special interest groups lobby on all issues regardless of their salience. In order to avoid clashes with public opinion, special interest groups tend to lobby in districts and with electorates who are relatively indifferent (Denzau, 1986). If constituencies generally support a certain side of a political debate, then policymakers will pay attention to the people electing them rather than lobby groups.

### *Political Activism*

Protests and petitions play potentially large roles in amplifying public opinion. They are solidarity tactics which signify widespread support for a given policy stance. They are used to indicate contempt with a certain policy or system which many people want to change (Madestam et al., 2013). Widespread participation in these tactics indicates widespread support for a policy stance and heightened salience of the issue.

Protests and petitions are only effective in changing policy in some conditions. First, enough people have to participate or support the initiative to demonstrate it is an issue to which a

policymaker should pay attention. There is no defined number of supporters a movement must mobilize to reach a critical mass, but actions must be big enough to gain attention. A protest of four thousand people will be much more impactful than a protest of forty. Second, activists must clearly define what actions they want taken and who they want to perform those actions. If there is no set of demands or a specific audience, policymakers will not know how best to respond to activists or what policies for which they are advocating (Battaglini, 2016; Shuman et al. 2024). Third, the mode of protests affects who is persuaded. Nonviolent protests draw interested individuals to the issue and create space for them to act (Shuman et al. 2024). Protests utilizing disruptive tactics are more likely to draw participants to fight for policy change. On many occasions when peaceful protests are ineffective, protesters will turn to disruptive techniques to gain attention and draw people into their cause.

### **The Effect of Public Opinion on Policy**

A robust literature exists supporting the direct link between shifts in public opinion and policy change. The United States is a liberal democracy, meaning constituents have freedom to express their opinions, through voting or otherwise, and there exists space for those opinions to be reflected in government policy. Although policymakers are not responsive to constituent opinions 100 percent of the time, they are found to respond to public opinion 75 percent of the time (Wright et al., 1987; Burstein, 1998; Burstein, 2003; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Policy responsiveness is not limited to elections, but changes dynamically throughout election cycles (Erickson et al., 2002; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). As individuals are not limited to changing their opinions solely based on election cycles, policymakers are not limited by election cycles to respond to overarching opinion changes.

Although policymakers are typically responsive to public opinion, specific circumstances affect likelihood of policy responsiveness. Responsiveness increases in regards to more salient issues (Lowery et al., 1989, Soroka and Wlezien, 2012). With salient issues, many individuals have strong opinions, and they expect their government to act in alignment with their interests. Policymakers are more likely to respond to constituent demands if they know their constituents are paying close attention to specific topics. Especially in locations where refugees and non-refugee migrants typically settle, immigration is a salient issue about which many individuals have strong opinions. (Ford, et al. 2015; Bohmelt, 2021). Policymakers respond to public opinion, even when responsiveness comes at the cost of responsibility to receive and protect migrants.

Salience level is further exacerbated by single-issue voting. When large portions of the electorate primarily focus on one issue about which they care deeply, they build a strong and active voting bloc. Policymakers are incentivized to respond to their electorate if there is a large population of single-issue voters who advocate for the same policy position. If they do not respond to voters' opinions, voters will not reelect them. (Bouton et al. 2018). Regardless of the rest of a policymaker's platform, if their platform does not align with single-issue voters, those voters will support a different candidate who aligns with their beliefs. Therefore, topics favored by single-issue voters will be a larger focus of a candidate's platform and will be more likely to be translated into law.

In addition to single-issue voting's effect on policy outcomes, financially endowed individuals may also experience greater influence on policy because they can leverage finances to influence candidates. Campaigns, however, do not run on dollars alone. Campaign donations are more likely to be leveraged for issues of lower salience (Soroka and Wlezien, 2012). Because

immigration is a highly salient issue, building widespread support for a candidate is important in addition to attracting donations. Therefore, finances are important, but so are votes.

### **Effects of Public Opinion on Immigration Policy**

Public opinion's effect on policy is well-established in political science literature, as are the factors which influence public opinion. Immigration follows the same lineage, as changes in public opinion lead to policy change. Immigration has become a popular topic in the media as the topic becomes more salient. Stories are released daily which cover immigration bills and negotiations in Congress, state actions to stop immigration or welcome immigrants, or cities evicting migrants from shelters. These factors work to influence public opinion and create factions within society which promote certain policy stances. Action taken by special interest groups, political activists, and unorganized constituents related to these issues then translate into policy change.

### **The Power of Negative Opinion**

When assessing the differential impact of pro- and anti-immigration sentiment on policy, individual cognitive biases typically build anti-immigrant rather than pro-immigrant sentiment. A combination of loss aversion, group attribution error, over-attribution effect, and fundamental attribution error paint a negative image of immigration and encourage negative feelings. These cognitive biases build a foundation of negative feelings towards immigrants and immigration. The potency of negative opinions makes them more visible to policymakers, and are therefore more likely to be translated into federal immigration policy.

#### *Loss Aversion*

Framing immigration as a loss highlights negative its consequences on the existing socioeconomic and political environment. The theory of loss aversion is a cognitive bias which states perceived losses are valued greater than perceived gains (Kahneman et al. 1991). This means the risk of loss elicits stronger reactions than potential gains. Common anti-immigration discourse frames it as a loss: loss of American jobs, loss of taxpayer money on public expenditures, and loss of safety for the average American. Feelings of loss span beyond a societal level to the personal. They attribute job loss to immigration or they feel less physically safe around immigrants. When the most common narrative around immigration is loss, individual attitudes on immigration are shaped by bias against loss.

Although individuals may want to avert loss, loss aversion is not absolute. Expected losses are not subject to the same threatening feelings as unexpected losses (Novemsky, 2005). Especially with the recent increase in immigration, Americans perceive personal and societal losses to be larger than expected, so individuals feel a stronger sense of loss. Loss aversion also only applies to hot-button topics (Yechiam, 2018). Immigration as a salient issue strongly follows the theory of loss aversion because it is perceived as a large problem in American society. To protect against the threat of great losses to individuals and their communities, individuals will advocate for restrictive immigration policies.

### *Group Attribution Error*

In addition to the cognitive bias of loss aversion, group attribution error works to perpetuate negative narratives of immigrants. Group attribution error is a cognitive bias in which individuals associate actions of an individual to all members of their perceived group (Allison and Messick, 1985). An individual's experience with one member of a perceived group translates



to the whole group. Group attribution error can perpetuate both positive and negative stereotypes, but when coupled with loss aversion, it is more likely to evoke negative feelings.

This bias highlights racial and ethnic differences between immigrants and their new communities to establish a power hierarchy. Group attribution error highlights in-group identities and feelings of control (Hirsh et al., 2021). By highlighting racial and ethnic differences, groups in power establish an 'other' to which they can attribute negative characteristics. Immigrants are definitionally an 'other' group because they are outsiders who move into a community. Those who are not identified in the group of power are pushed to other groups lower on the social hierarchy. Non-white immigrants are often identified as a member of an 'other' group.

Media outlets aid in constructing the 'other' regardless of their political bias. News stories form and reinforce an image of who is migrating and for what reasons. Ukrainians are framed as helpless refugees fleeing Russian aggression. Media related to Latin Americans typically paints them as criminals which cross the border illegally (Fox News, 2024). Some media outlets go as far as describing immigration, especially irregular immigration, as an invasion which threatens American national security and peace. These narratives, although they explain the actions of some migrants, do not explain the actions of all migrants.

Negative narratives surrounding the threatening nature of immigrants are furthered by the group attribution error. Individuals perceive more extreme attitudes among threatening groups (Corneille et al., 2001). Therefore, constructing all immigrants as a threatening group not only unfairly blankets negative characteristics on all immigrants, but they are believed to be more extreme in their beliefs. Many Americans feel threatened by all immigrants because some immigrants have been deemed as dangerous or threatening. Immigration systems are then attacked as a means to control extremism.

### *Fundamental Attribution Error and Over-Attribution Effect*

Group attribution error accounts for negative characteristics associated to an individual based on their perceived identity within a certain group, whereas fundamental attribution error and the over-attribution effect designate those negative group characteristics to the fundamental being of others. The over-attribution effect indicates individuals attribute the behavior of others to a causal factor which is most available to them (Jones and Harris, 1967). In terms of immigration, others are typically identified in terms of their immigrant status. This bias can contribute to a positive view of immigrants, but more often encourages negative feelings based on harmful stereotypes and generalizations.

Coupling over-attribution effect with the fundamental attribution error, which states individuals attribute the actions of others to the personalities of others rather than considering situational factors, explains why negative attributes and stereotypes of immigrants are attributed to who they are as people (Tetlock, 1985; Tetlock, 1991). Immigrants are seen as an 'other,' so when negative stereotypes are perpetuated, individuals define the personality of all immigrants by the negative actions of a few. Fundamental attribution error specifically comments on negative characteristics of others, not positive characteristics. The negative actions of some immigrants are a reflection of their character and corrupted morals. If individuals believe there is something fundamentally wrong with the character of immigrants, they are more likely to believe there is something fundamentally wrong with increased levels of immigration. Therefore, anti-immigrant and anti-immigration sentiment are more potent than pro-immigration sentiment which is not impacted by fundamental attribution error, and anti-immigration sentiment is more likely to translate into policy.

### *Directional Effects of Cognitive Biases*

Individually, these biases can also encourage pro-immigration sentiment among different people. Individuals can fear loss of diversity or identify individuals with xenophobic beliefs as ‘others,’ and those beliefs define their entire personalities. Additionally, individuals can attribute positive characteristics to immigrants if they perceive positive actions by immigrants. No matter the direction in which the bias works, biases create stereotypes. News media and social media outlets, as well as certain politicians, often perpetuate negative stereotypes of immigrants as lazy criminals who are taking American jobs. These stereotypes disseminated by trusted sources trigger negative directional effects of cognitive biases. Therefore, these biases are more likely to trigger anti-immigration beliefs rather than pro-immigration beliefs.

In addition to stereotypes which encourage anti-immigration sentiment, implicit and explicit racism play a large role in evoking cognitive biases against immigrants. Many immigrants coming to the United States, especially those who enter the country outside of legal pathways, have black or brown skin. Not only are non-white immigrants perceived through the lens of cognitive biases against immigrants, but they are also perceived using biases against minority communities. Those who are grouped by xenophobic beliefs may be of a racial or ethnic minority group, but the overarching group is not also characterized by these traits like immigrants.

### **Policy Response to Negative Public Opinion**

Cognitive biases may encourage negative opinions of immigration, but these opinions need to work through political mechanisms to translate into policy. The literature strongly supports the role of public opinion in shaping policy outcomes (Burstein, 1998; Burstein, 2003; Soroka and Wlezien, 2010). Policy development can be explained through the three I’s:

institutions, interests, and ideas (Palier and Surel, 2005; Beland, 2009). The three I's set the framework through which public interests are articulated and incorporated into policy. Interests represent the expected gains from a specific policy, ideas represent the cognitive biases which point individuals toward a specific policy, and institutions are the rules established through which policy is passed (Hay, 2004). Political networks are also necessary to evaluate the feasibility of policy implementation (Shearer et al., 2016). Without the networks through which policymakers work together, policy would not be implemented. Without the 3I+N framework, negative opinions of immigration would not translate into federal policy.

### *Ideas*

Ideas are individuals' opinions on a given topic which they want translated into policy. Based on the cognitive biases of loss aversion, group attribution error, fundamental attribution error, and over-attribution effect which encourage anti-immigration sentiment, ideas about immigration tend to point toward restrictive policy. Individuals expect their ideas to be represented in legislative bodies, especially when their opinions are strong. Because many individuals have strong beliefs to decrease immigration, policymakers are likely to translate those beliefs into policy.

### *Interests*

Interests explain an individual's expected gain from a policy. Gains are more strongly felt if they are personal gains rather than societal gains. Individuals have a vested interest in their own economic and physical security. If individuals feel personally threatened by the nature and presence of immigrants, then immigration restriction will personally benefit their quality of life. Immigrants cannot take American jobs or threaten the physical safety of an individual if they

cannot cross the border. When cognitive biases support anti-immigration sentiment and individuals see personal gains from decreased immigration, they are likely to advocate for restrictive immigration policy. Therefore, the anti-immigration ideas and interests of individuals are likely to be translated into policy.

### *Institutions*

Liberal democracy is the main institution involved in translating public opinion into policy. Liberal democracies are defined by allowing the public to share and advocate for their opinions in multiple formats. This may include the right to vote in free and fair elections, the right to protest, or the right to free speech. In the United States, these rights are enshrined in the Constitution and subsequent legislation to expand freedoms.

Elections and other forms of advocacy are essential to a healthy democracy, as individuals are able to influence their government to act on their behalf. Free and fair elections are central to the United States' identity as a liberal democracy (Madison, Federalist #10). Voting is an essential avenue through which constituents can share and advocate for their opinions. If a policymaker acts against their constituents' wishes, they will be voted out of office. Policymakers will act in alignment with their constituents' interests even if their constituents' opinions conflict with their own. Therefore, if a majority of public opinion supports a specific policy angle, policymakers will likely support it. In addition to voting, meeting with or writing letters to elected officials or engaging in other forms of political activism assist in encouraging elected officials to act on behalf of constituents. Americans expect their elected officials to be responsive to their desires because expression and elections are embedded in the political culture of the country.

An essential aspect of liberal democracy is the concept of a government founded by the people for the people. Popular sovereignty, a government established by the consent of the governed, is a valued founding principle of the United States as established in the Declaration of Independence (Jefferson et al, 1776). Although the Declaration of Independence is not legally-binding, the principle of government at the consent of the people is a key feature of the American identity. Individuals expect their government to respond to their opinions. Therefore, policymakers act on behalf of their constituents because the American people are the ones who give policymakers power.

Policy is more likely to restrict immigration not only because of the cognitive biases and personal gains which encourage anti-immigration sentiment, but also because of elected officials are expected to translate that sentiment into policy. Regardless of their personal beliefs, policymakers will act on the will of their constituents because the institution of liberal democracy supports responsiveness to the electorate. Without the institutional mechanism of liberal democracy, policy would more likely align with government interests regardless of expressed public interests.

### *Networks*

Beyond the political will to change policy, policy change must be feasible. Networks are the systems of policymakers and the system in which they work to change policy (Shearer et al. 2016). Without networks of policymakers, no policies would be passed. The will to change policy may exist, but if policymakers cannot work together to create and pass legislation, then nothing will change. Networks facilitate connections through which policymakers work together within the political system to create and implement new policies.

## **Hypothesis**

Public opinion is effective in influencing policy. Because immigration is a highly salient issue, enacted policies are likely to follow overall societal opinion on the issue. Cognitive biases perpetuate negative images and stereotypes of immigrants which encourage negative opinions toward immigrants. The principle of liberal democracy which dictates policymakers are responsive to their electorate facilitates the translation of negative opinions into policy. Based on this connection, I hypothesize negative public opinion of immigration in the United States will result in restrictive immigration policy more often and to a greater extent than positive public opinion will lead to open immigration policy.

The null hypothesis states aggregate anti-immigration sentiment does not affect immigration policy to a greater extent than pro-immigration sentiment. Rejection of the null hypothesis will occur if anti-immigration sentiment corresponds with a greater number of restrictive policies enacted than pro-immigration sentiment corresponds with liberal policies enacted. Failure to reject the null hypothesis will occur if there is no directional relationship between public opinion and policy change.

Even if leaders in the United States are willing to adhere to international policies and norms of refugee or migrant reception and/or protection, adherence has its limits. Governing bodies may be willing to resettle a certain number of refugees or allow a certain quota of migrants, but border restrictions imply a limit to levels of acceptable migration. Communities may be willing to accept migrants and refugees to a certain extent, but at some point, the number of migrants becomes too many.

## **Methods**

This study measures the correlation between shifts in public opinion and policy, specifically addressing the differential effects of public opinion which support or oppose immigration to the United States. I hypothesize anti-immigration public opinion will correlate with restrictive policy changes to a greater extent than pro-immigration opinion leads to less restrictive immigration policies. I study this hypothesis by assessing the correlation between shifts in public opinion and the number and direction of policies implemented in the United States between 1992 and 2012.

Addressing correlations in this manner will determine the connection between public opinion and policy. These datasets cannot be combined due to mismatching elements. Therefore, correlations follow general trends rather than direct numerical measurements. Although this is less precise than numerical calculations, it allows for flexibility in measuring the delaying effect of bureaucratic processes.

The process of developing policies takes time. A lag effect must be taken into account when analyzing correlations. Policymakers are not able to immediately pass legislation based on shifts in public opinion. Because the process of developing a policy and passing it through Congress typically takes months, sometimes years, I attribute policies passed within the following four years to a shift in public opinion.

### *Limitations*

Measuring correlations by comparing data by hand is less precise than calculating numerical correlations. A numerical calculation would provide a basis for measuring how correlation changes over time and the extent to which policy reflects shifts in public opinion. Numerical calculation, however, allows less room for adjustment based on bureaucratic delays. Addressing correlations without specific calculations allows the researcher to use their



judgement to adjust analysis based on holistic data considerations and historical considerations not reflected in the data.

Measurement is also limited by limited data availability. Public opinion polls are expensive to conduct, so national polls are often only conducted in election years. As shifts in opinion are not limited to national elections, this limits the ability to analyze opinion shifts dynamically throughout an election cycle. Additionally, this research is limited by the inclusion of the chosen question on the ANES survey. Between 1992 and 2000, it was included for midterm and presidential elections, but after 2000, the question was only included during presidential election years. This unevenly distributes data within the time period studied. Because data is unavailable, uncollected data is measured the same as the prior year with available data.

Policy data is also limited, as the dataset does not measure policies passed after 2013. Even though public opinion data is available until 2020, limited policy data inhibits conducting analysis after 2013. Especially with polarizing elections in 2016 and 2020, policy data which reflects these elections would greatly enhance the study.

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Aggregate public opinion of immigration in the United States is the independent variable in this study. Data were drawn from the American National Elections Studies database every two years from 1992 to 2000, and every four years from 2000 to 2020. Overall, this dataset includes 68 thousand observations for 1,031 variables between 1948 and 2020.

The specific question from which data were drawn focuses on a reported preferred increase or decrease in foreign-born immigrants to the United States from the year prior. A responded preference for a decreased number of immigrants is coded as three, two indicates

immigrant reception stay the same, and one indicates a responded preference for increased immigration. Between 1992 and 2020, most participants indicated preference for decreased immigration levels to the United States, as shown by table 1. A more robust description of statistics for individual years is located in appendix one.

Table 1. Distribution of Immigration Public Opinion Responses

1 (increase immigration)	2 (remain the same)	3 (decrease immigration)
5161	11437	11761

Over time, the distribution of responded opinions shifts only slightly. The average response over all ten years is 2.34. The highest average response is 2.60 in 1994, and the lowest is 1.97 in 2020. All of these responses suggest public support for maintaining immigration levels from the previous year with a slight preference for decreasing immigration which diminishes over time.

Data were also drawn from the Determinants of International Migration dataset from the International Migration Institute. This dataset is used to measure policy openness in terms of immigration policy in 45 different countries. This is solely national/federal level data and data from multi/bilateral agreements. It does not include data from states or smaller political districts. This dataset includes 6505 observations of 21 variables. The time period ranges from 1945 to 2013. These data were recoded to measure one as a policy to liberalize immigration, response two indicates a new policy which did not change in restrictiveness from the previous, and response three which indicates a more restrictive policy change. These data will be used to determine how immigration policy changes over time. Data were also gathered on policies toward specific countries, but for the purpose of this analysis, those data are not included.

Table 2. Distribution of Policy Change

1 (less restrictive)	2 (remain the same)	3 (more restrictive)
29	2	54

In total, 85 immigration-related policies were enacted in the studied years between 1992 and 2013. A full breakdown of how many policies were passed in each year can be found in appendix two. In the full time period, significantly more policies which restrict immigration were implemented than policies which allow or encourage immigration. 13 restrictive policies were implemented in 1996, another seven in 2005, and eight more in 2007. If any restrictive policies are passed in other years, there were typically two or three passed. Liberal policies were not passed in groups during this time period; the largest number of less restrictive policies passed in one year occurred in 2000 when four were passed.

### *Policy Stances*

Discussion of policy restrictiveness becomes complicated when assessing policies which are less restrictive than previous policies. Not only does this category include policies which encourage immigration, but it also includes policies which decrease barriers to immigration. Therefore, immigration is not necessarily encouraged or facilitated through less restrictive policies, but restrictions are eased within this category. For the sake of clarity, this paper will discuss less restrictive or liberal policies as transitioning to more open immigration.

### **Findings**

Shifts in public opinion generally correspond with the implementation of immigration policy. Although overall opinion is important, large shifts in reported opinion incentivize policymakers to pass new policies to restrict or open immigration. From 1992 to 2012, public

opinion generally trends toward diminishing support for immigration restriction. Policymakers pass policies based on these shifts, but correlation between opinion and implementation is not linear over time. Shifts in public opinion, especially if they represent decreased support for immigration, generally correspond with new policies implemented in the following three to four years. These findings support the study's hypothesis.

### *Public Opinion*

Reported public opinion of immigration changes little over time. This is likely because immigration is a salient issue and people typically hold steadfast beliefs which are not easily influenced. Even though there are no dramatic shifts in reported preference, these data can still be analyzed focused on existing shifts. The data show reported public opinion mainly favors decreased immigration, but gradually shifts toward maintaining immigration levels by the end of the timeframe. A visual representation of this shift is shown in Figure 1a, and raw public opinion data is included in appendix three.

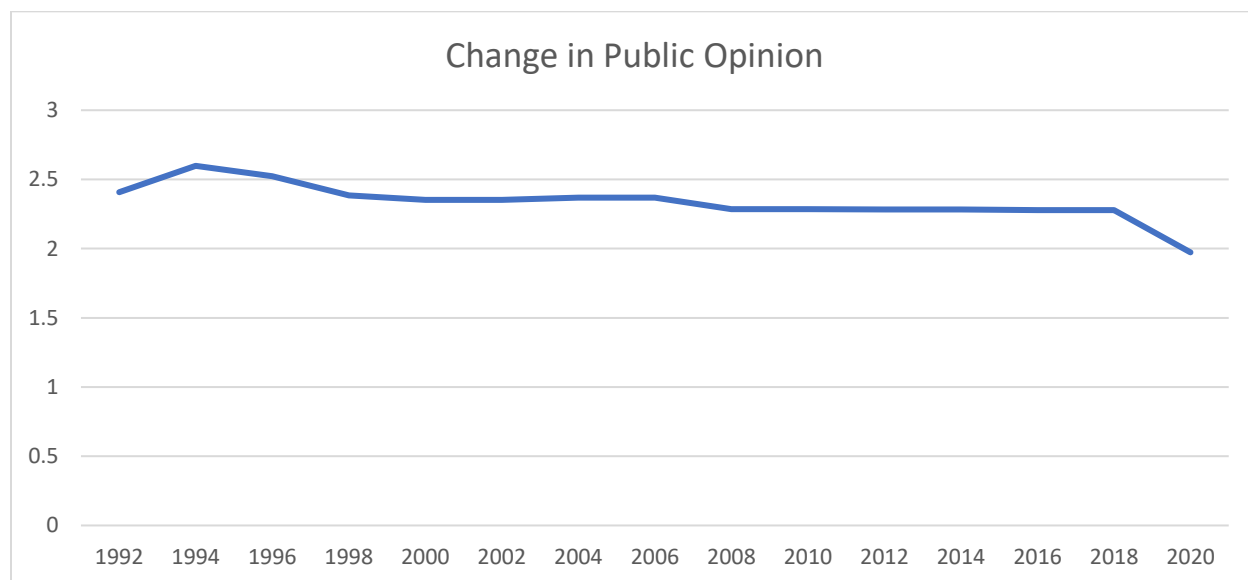


Figure 1a. Change in public opinion of immigration in the United States between 1992 and 2020 as reported in the American National Elections Survey database.

Quickly in 1994, public opinion reflects a restrictive attitude toward immigration, shifting from an average response of 2.41 in 1992 to an average of 2.60 in 1994. This is a 0.19 shift in public opinion to favor decreasing immigration. A shift in opinion toward open immigration also occurs in 1996 to 2.52 and continues in 1998 to 2.38. This still favors decreasing immigration overall, but trends toward maintaining immigration levels. These are the largest shift in public opinion throughout the time period included in the study.

Figure 1b shows the share of pro- and anti-immigration public opinion between 1992 and 2013. In total, a reported preference for decreased immigration holds a much larger share of responses. The two responses greatly differ in the mid-1990s with the largest difference in response share in 1994. In 1992, 49 percent of respondents indicate a preference for decreased immigration, whereas only eight percent indicate a preference for increased immigration. In 1994, 65 percent of the surveyed public indicated a preference for decreased immigration, whereas five percent indicated a preference for increased immigration. This is a large shift. After 1994, the share of responses indicating a preference for decreased immigration steadily declines.

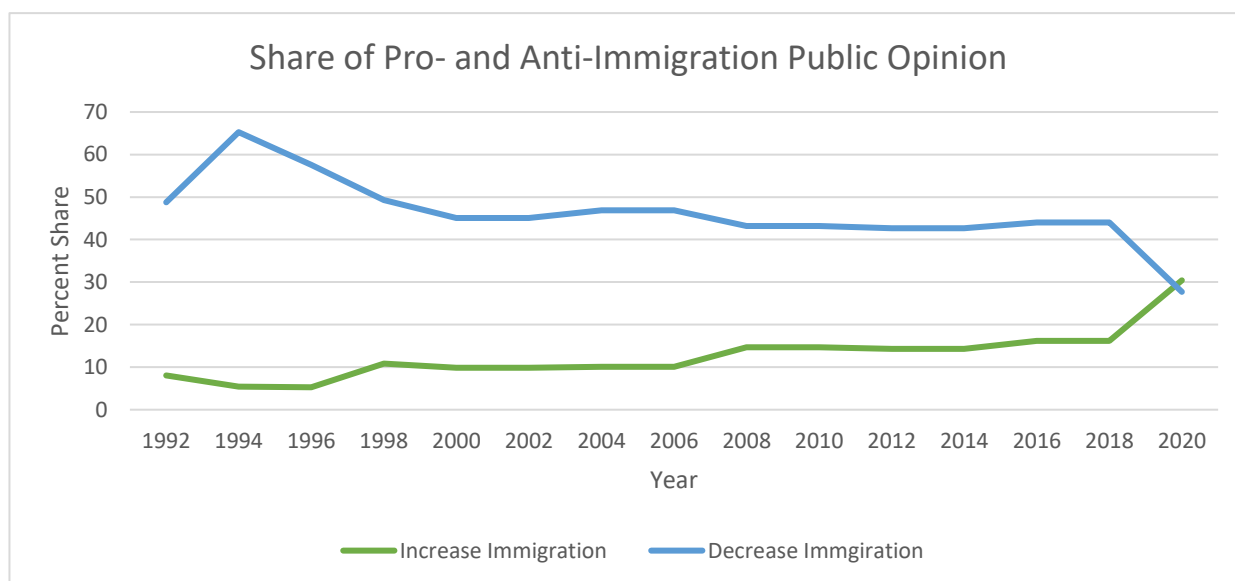


Figure 1b. Share of pro- and anti-immigration public opinion between 1992 and 2020 as reported by the American National Election Survey.

The share of preferences evens over time, with 43 percent responding in support of decreased immigration and 14 percent response in favor of increased immigration, the share of people who want to increase immigration does not overtake the share of those who want to decrease immigration until 2020 when share of the two responses converge. The shifts in public opinion indicated by the proportion of responses shared between responded preference for increased or decreased immigration mirror those of the average response over time.

Figure 1c represents the magnitude of differences in share of public opinion between pro- and anti-immigration opinion. This graph shows a large difference in share at the beginning of the time period which greatly favors decreasing immigration. The share becomes less extreme throughout the time period until reported support for increased immigration briefly overtakes preference for decreased immigration in 2020.

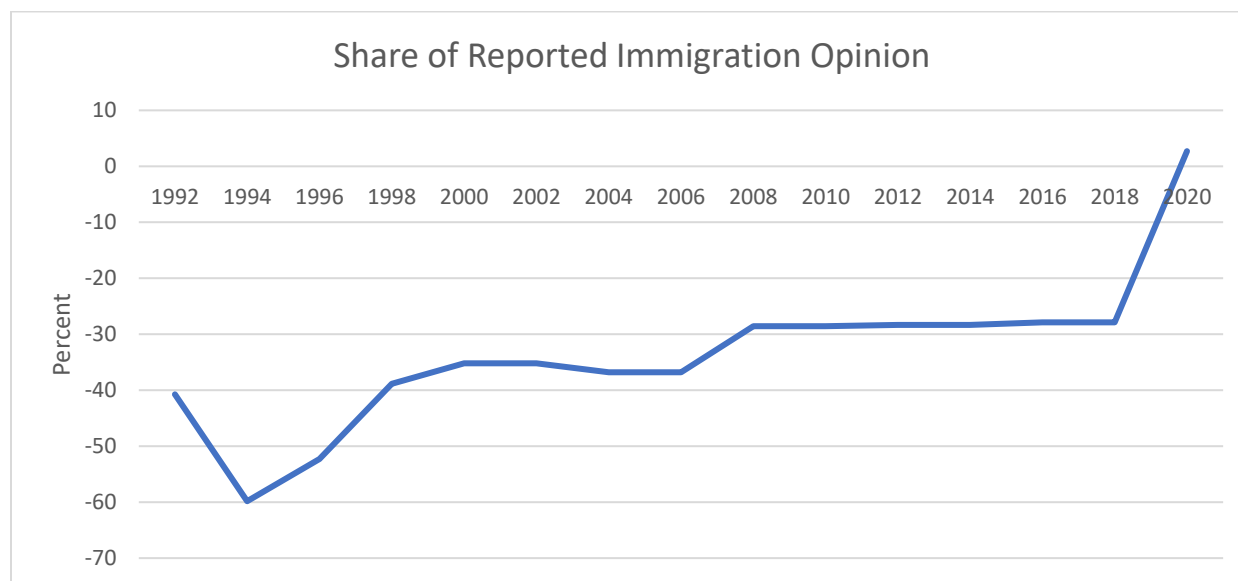


Figure 1c. Percent share of anti-immigration sentiment subtracted from the percent share of pro-immigration sentiment between 1992 and 2020. This figure represents the magnitude of the share of anti-immigration sentiment over pro-immigration sentiment.

Figures 2a and 2b show a dynamic representation of the average restrictiveness of immigration policies passed between 1992 and 2012. Few policies were passed in many of these years. The most policies were passed in 1996 when 14 policies were passed, 13 of which were more restrictive than prior policies. 11 policies were also passed in 2005, seven of which are more restrictive. A graph of the number of policies passed for each classification is represented in Figure A2a in appendix two.

Figures 2a and 2b represent similar results in different ways. Figure 2a shows the average openness of new policies passed. In this graph, a reported average which measures closer to one indicates more open policies were passed in a given year. An average measured closer to three indicates more restrictive policies were passed in a given year. Figure 2b shows the mathematical range of policies passed. Positive values indicate a larger number of liberal policies were passed, and a larger negative number indicates a larger number of restrictive policies were passed.

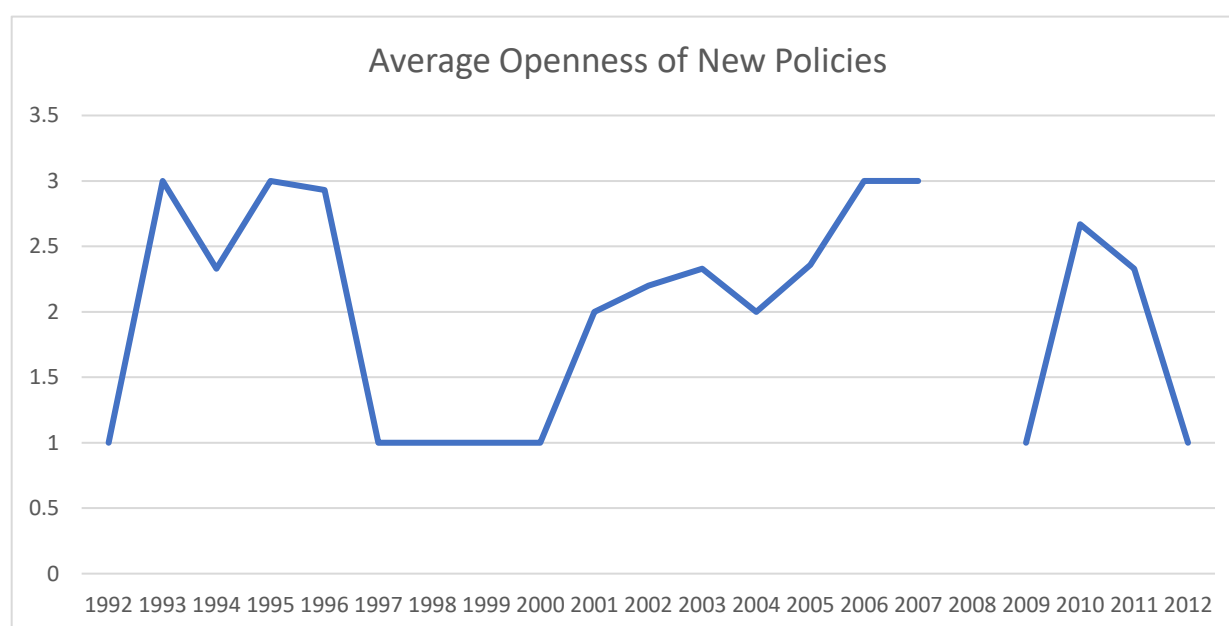


Figure 2a. Average immigration policy restrictiveness and openness as measured by the Determinants of International Migration dataset from the International Migration Institute between 1992 and 2012. No policies were passed in 2008, which is represented by the break in the graph.

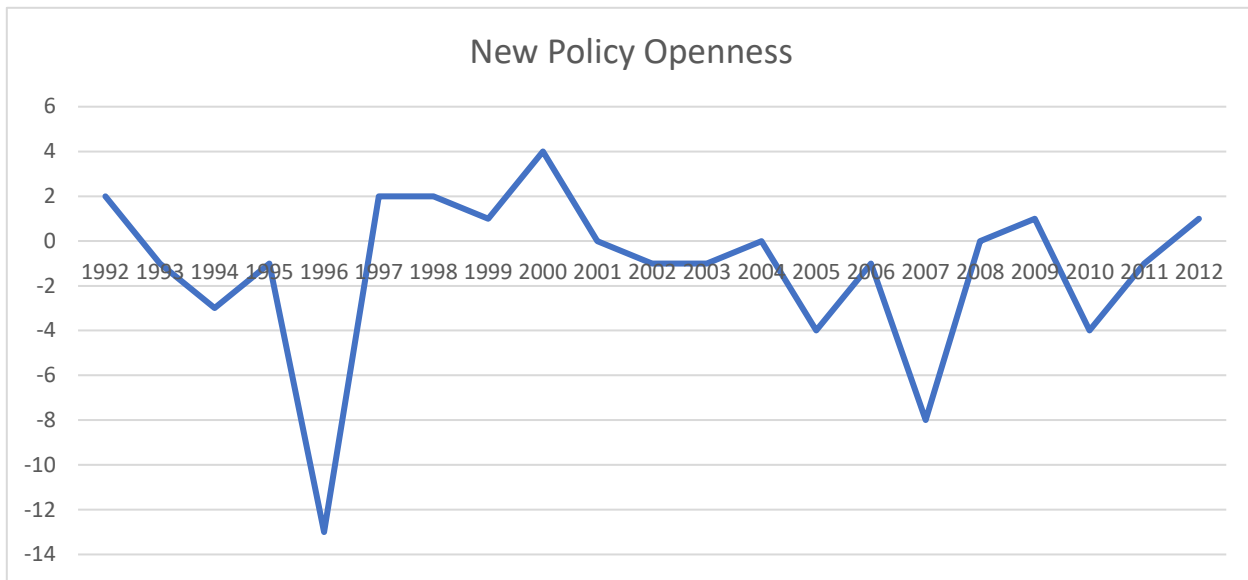


Figure 2b. This graph represents the number of restrictive immigration policies implemented (negative) subtracted from the number of liberal immigration policies implemented (positive). The further the graph deviates from zero, the more lop-sided policy implementation was in that year. Zero policies were passed in 2008, so the value for that year is zero.

Overall, there is no clear direction in which the average policy restrictiveness moves.

There are, however, times in which policy is one-sided, either to restrict or facilitate immigration. Between 1993 and 1996, most policies passed were more restrictive in nature; the number of policies passed to open immigration never outnumbered the restrictive policies passed. Conversely, a series of less restrictive policies were passed between 1997 and 2000. During this time, no policies of the same or more restrictiveness level were passed. After these periods of time, the balance between less and more restrictive policies passed remains relatively stable with policies passed in all years which support both positions. The year 2007 favors more restrictive policy with no open policies passed, and 2010 and 2011 see policies passed at both positions, but more policies to restrict immigration were passed than to open immigration. This does not follow a specific linear direction, but more restrictive policies are passed during this



time frame than are open policies. Raw data on which policies were passed when is included in appendix two.

### *Policy Implementation Based on Shifts in Public Opinion*

During the given time frame, 85 total immigration-related policies were passed. As shown in Figure Three, more restrictive policies were passed than open policies in the majority of years. Even when there are both restrictive and open policies passed in the same year, a greater number of restrictive policies tend to be passed. In total, 54 restrictive policies, 2 which remained the same, and 29 policies to open immigration were passed.

Changes in policy generally follow shifts in public opinion. After the shifted preference for decreased immigration in 1994, a series of restrictive policies were passed in the following years: six were passed in 1994, one in 1995, and 13 in 1996, for a total of 20 passed in three years. During this time, only three less restrictive immigration policies were passed.

The average reported support for decreasing immigration diminished in both 1996 and 1998. Although overall opinion still favors decreasing immigration, a liberal shift in opinion signals less support for highly restrictive policies. This shift is followed by the implementation of a succession of less restrictive policies: two in 1997, two in 1998, one in 1999, and four in 2000, for a total of nine policies passed in four years. Policymakers respond to shifting opinion by implementing policies which ease restrictions passed in the previous time period. During this time period, no policies were passed to further restrict immigration.

Beginning in 1998 and moving onward, public opinion polls remain stable. The average response shifts one tenth of a response over 18 years from 2.38 in 1998 to 2.27 in 2016. Stable opinion during this time frame corresponds to a relatively even number of more and less restrictive policies implemented. Between 2001 and 2005, open and restrictive policies generally

match, with 11 open policies passed and 17 restrictive policies passed. A minor shift toward decreasing immigration occurs between 2000 and 2004, which is coupled with eight restrictive policies passed in 2007 with no open policies passed. This is a disproportionately high number of restrictive policies passed compared to other shifts in public opinion. Finally, between 2009 and 2012, four open and seven restrictive policies were passed. Overall, 15 open and 33 restrictive policies were passed after 2001. Besides the disproportionate number of policies passed in 2007, a relatively comparable number of more and less restrictive immigration policies implemented after 2001 reflects a relatively stable public opinion of immigration during this time period.

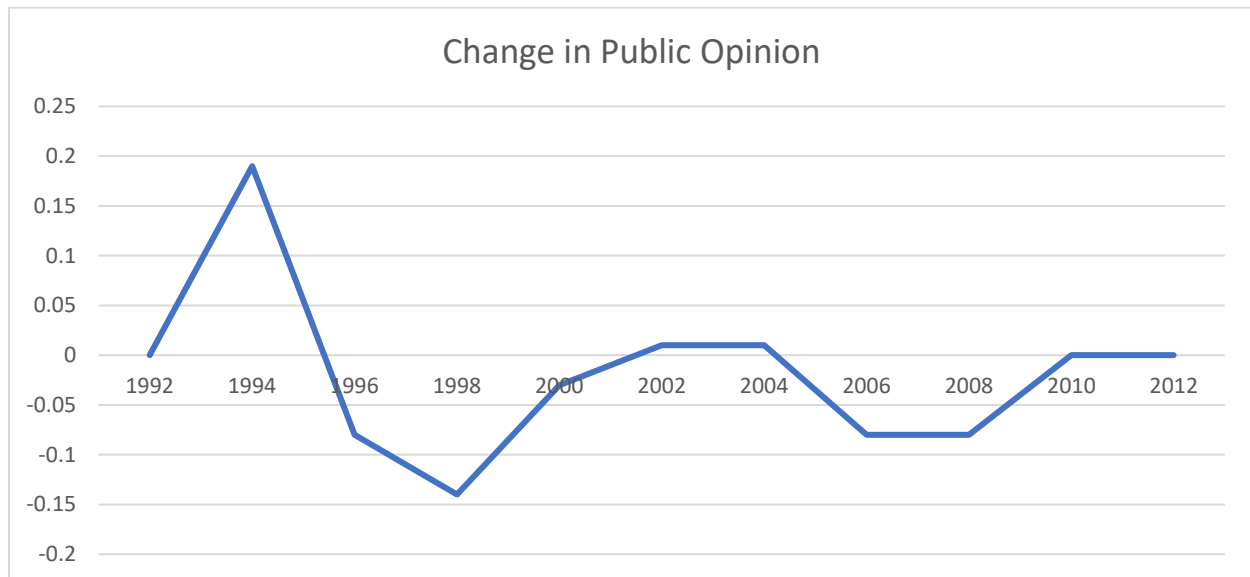


Figure 4. Reported change in public opinion between 1994 and 2014, as reported by the ANES dataset. This graph represents how public opinion changed from the year prior.

Data which supports the hypothesis would not only show an increased number of policies passed in the four years following large shifts in public opinion, but it will also show a greater number of policies passed which restrict immigration following opinion shifts than policies to increase immigration. Figure Four shows the change in average public opinion over time. More extreme values on the chart indicate a more extreme deviance from the prior year. To support the

hypothesis, large positive numbers should correspond with a greater number of restrictive policies implemented than large negative values correspond to liberal policies implemented.

The largest positive value on this graph is 0.19 in 1994. Following this sharp shift to support decreased immigration, 20 policies were passed between 1994 and 1996 to restrict immigration. This indicates a strong correlation between public opinion which supports decreased immigration and restrictive policies. Compared to a 0.8 downward shift in 1996 and another 0.14 shift in 1998, nine policies were passed to liberalize immigration between 1997 and 2000. Although these two opinion shifts are similar in magnitude, the resulting policy sphere heavily favors restrictive policy. This finding aligns with the proposed hypothesis.

A lesser-magnitude shift in the direction of increasing immigration occurs between 2004 and 2008 as well. This shift does not correspond to additional open policies passed. Four less restrictive policies were passed between 2009 and 2012, 15 more restrictive policies were also passed between 2007 and 2011. Because this is a shift of a lesser-magnitude, immigration may have been a less-salient issue in this time period, and therefore policy may be less reactive to public opinion.

Overall, these findings generally support the hypothesis. Large shifts in public opinion in favor of decreasing immigration correspond with large numbers of restrictive immigration policies passed to a greater extent than shifts in favor of increasing immigration correspond with open policy. This correlation is only applicable with relatively large shifts, as smaller shifts indicate immigration is less salient of an issue at a particular period of time.

## **Discussion**

Public opinion literature establishes a strong connection between public opinion and policy development for politically salient issues, but does not discuss the differential effects of

positive and negative public opinion. Immigration in the United States is a particularly salient issue, but the literature focuses on little beyond the basic connection between public opinion and policy. Does pro-immigration public opinion affect immigration policy in the United States to the same extent and scope as anti-immigration public opinion? This study has shown a correlation between shifts in public opinion to decrease immigration and policies implemented to restrict immigration to the United States.

Policy changes which correlate with public opinion also only occur during shifts of public opinion. Aggregate reported measures of public opinion change little throughout the time period and lean toward favoring decreased immigration. This relative stability has created a homeostasis from which sizable deviation indicates constituents care about an issue and want policymakers to act on their behalf. If there are large shifts, policymakers are likely to follow public opinion because they know their constituents care about an issue and are paying attention. If they go against public opinion, they risk reelection.

Although a correlation between public opinion and policy exists, it only exists when the issue is most salient. Immigration is a divisive issue in the United States, but salience is not static. When large shifts in aggregate opinion occur, this indicates immigration is a topic on voters' minds. They are thinking about it enough to shift their opinion. At times when changes in public opinion are minimal, immigration is less salient, so policy will be less responsive to public opinion. Therefore, policy is more likely to change with larger shifts in opinion in either direction.

The correlation between public opinion shifts and policy change rely on the institution of liberal democracy. Individuals consume information through biases, and these biases affect their opinions on immigration and how they expect their government to respond. If an individual

perceives a specific benefit from a policy, then they have a vested interest in the implementation of that policy. If liberal democracy is functioning as it is meant to function, constituents will have access to lobby their elected officials to advocate for different policies. If an individual or group can convince a policymaker of the societal and political benefits of a stance, a policymaker will work through their networks to enact legislation. This structure comments on the methods pro- and anti-immigration advocates can use to encourage policy change.

### *Implications*

Those advocating for specific policy measures should seize opportunities to engage with policymakers during time periods of large shifts in public opinion. Not only is this an important realization for those who draft, negotiate, and pass laws, but also for policy advocates who lobby for change. Whether on the pro- or anti-immigration side of the argument, sizable shifts in public opinion are an important turning point for the implementation of new policies. Capitalizing on public opinion shifts can help individuals or organizations leverage policymakers to act on their behalf. Advocates must know their audience and effectively leverage them when they are most vulnerable to working in an advocate's favor.

Since 2020, public opinion in the United States reports a preference for decreased immigration (Gallup, 2023). Policymakers on the state and federal level have capitalized on this shift to enact a sea of anti-immigration policies and acts of border fortification. To respond to a shifted preference toward decreased levels of immigration, the Biden administration has changed its platform to support restrictive immigration policy. This administration has typically been pro-immigration, especially in terms building legal pathways for potential immigrants, as well as pathways to citizenship for established undocumented residents. To appease voters ahead of the 2024 presidential election, the Biden administration even worked with both Republican and

Democratic members of Congress to design a comprehensive immigration reform bill which limits immigration in specific circumstances. Even though this bill was not passed by Congress, it represents a willingness to restrict immigration because a critical mass of the electorate believe it is appropriate.

In addition to capitalizing on shifts in public opinion, pro-immigration advocates must also pay attention to more than just human rights. Governments should be protecting the rights and needs of all people, so human rights are an important avenue for political advocacy. Human rights, however, are not the only reason to protect immigration and immigrants. Framing their argument in terms of economics and labor, public expenditures, and decreased crime rates will help pro-immigration advocates reach wider audiences. Different arguments resonate with different people. Many people care about human rights, but some care about the economic impacts of immigration more. Diversifying how advocates frame the benefits of immigration will help them reach a wider audience to influence public opinion and policy.

Because pro-immigration shifts in public opinion are not as common as anti-immigration shifts, advocates must capitalize on shifts when they can. Therefore, they must be prepared and organized to engage all people. By building a larger and stronger coalition of allies, advocates will be able to grow their influence and advocate for their desired set of policies.

Public opinion changes dynamically throughout election cycles, so advocates must build political and societal support for their stance at all times, not just when the issue is the most salient. Although advocacy is more effective during periods of shifting opinions, it does not need to be limited to these time periods. If advocates build structures of advocacy before there is a measured shift in opinion, these structures will be ready to mobilize when the time is right.

*Alternative Explanations to Policy Change*

Although changes in public opinion correspond to policy change, establishing a causal link between the two is impossible without knowing the rationale of policymakers. There are also likely multiple factors which contribute to an official's decision to propose or support a policy. Multiple major events occurred in the United States between 1992 and 2012, including President Clinton's crackdown on crime, the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the recession of 2007-2009. These events influenced changes in public opinion and national policy related to immigration at the same time. Because these events also influence public opinion of immigration, they do not lead to the rejection of the hypothesis, but they do offer instances in which the causal link between public opinion and policy formation is blurred. Which came first: the policy or the opinion? This caveat is not to disprove the importance of public opinion in policy change. Those who create policy on salient issues must take their constituents' and funders' opinions into account when creating policy because they risk reelection if they go against these individuals wishes.

#### Anti-Crime Policy of the Mid '90s

In 1994, President Bill Clinton advocated for a series of policies to address high crime rates in the United States. This includes the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, a 356-page document which outlines a plan for crime prevention through increased funding for police officers and operations to deter crime and take violent criminals off the street (congress.gov, 1994). This policy was complimented by the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 which further established punishments for undocumented immigrants who commit crimes (congress.gov, 1996). A vocal portion of the public was dismayed by state tax dollar spending on incarceration of immigrants when federal border initiatives should keep them out of the country. IIRIRA outlines reimbursement of state

incarceration costs of undocumented immigrants before transferring them to federal custody (congress.gov, 1994). It incentivizes incarceration of undocumented immigrants to gain revenue from the federal government.

Along with a crackdown on crime came an increase in government expenditures on policing and incarceration. The cost of incarceration is high, so state and federal officials saw curbing immigrant crime as a means to decrease government expenditures. If immigrants are not able to enter the United States illegally, they are not able to commit crimes, and tax dollars will not be allocated to their incarceration. The same lineage of thought does not work on American citizens because they cannot be deported. Therefore, policymakers saw a crackdown on immigration as a means to decrease crime and crime-related expenditure.

President Clinton's decision to crackdown on crime in 1994 corresponds with a decreased reported favorability of immigration and a significant number of policies enacted to restrict immigration. This connection likely exists because strongly-worded rhetoric by policymakers influenced the opinions of the general public to influence public buy-in of larger crime issues. A shift in public opinion then indicates a preference for restrictive policies. If policymakers do not limit immigration in this instance, they are seen as weak on crime and a less-effective leader.

### September 11 Terrorist Attacks

On September 11, 2001, al-Qaeda terrorist organization carried out the largest terrorist attack to ever occur on United States soil, killing nearly three thousand people. In response to these attacks, the United States fortified borders with additional security at land borders and airports, as well as restricted immigration, especially from countries associated with terrorism. Racial profiling of Muslims and those of Middle-Eastern descent was rampant, as security institutions and the general public considered people of these groups a threat.



After the September 11 attacks, the United States relaxed restrictions on the migration of some people while inhibiting the migration of others. Those who come from countries Muslim-majority countries or those associated with terror are much more restricted in visiting or migrating to the United States. Visas were still available, but the application price rose and processing times lengthened. This was used as a deterrence technique to deter low-income people or people with immediate needs from applying for visas. These people tend to live in poorer, less-secure countries.

ANES did not measure public opinion of immigration until 2004, by which time it was comparable to that of 2000. The number of policies implemented between 2001 and 2004 also remain relatively stable, with a slightly higher number of restrictive policies implemented each year. The focus of immigration policy was to let the ‘good’ people in and keep the ‘bad’ people out. Legal pathways to immigration were restricted, especially for those of specific groups, but immigration was not entirely halted. Additionally, in terms of refugee admissions, the refugee ceiling remained at a similar level, but fewer refugees were admitted. This reality would not be reflected in policy data.

#### The Great Recession, 2007-2009

The Great Recession was the most severe period of global economic depression since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Economic struggles were felt on the country and individual levels. Many individuals lost their jobs and struggled to afford goods with rising prices. During periods of economic downturn or in the anticipation of such events, immigration is a common target because governments want to protect domestic jobs. If foreigners enter the country for employment, narratives of immigrants taking American jobs spread. Policymakers, therefore, enact policies which limit immigration, especially for jobs which largely American workforces.

They may even enact restrictive policies preemptively to reinforce trust in the political system, which is typically weak in an ailing economy.

Even though public opinion shifts slightly toward increasing immigration between 2004 and 2012, 15 restrictive policies were enacted between 2007 and 2011 compared to only three liberal policies. Although the shift in public opinion is minimal, it should correspond with a larger number of liberal policies. This deviance from the anticipated result may be due to the financial crisis. Policymakers acted preemptively to decrease immigration and alleviate job loss. Analysis of sector-level unemployment rates and data which addresses sentiment of American job loss to immigrant competitors would provide a clearer picture of the effects of the Great Recession on immigration policy in the United States.

Although pertinent national events are not the only influence on policy, they are an alternative factor into why certain policies are implemented in certain times. Immigrants are used as a scapegoat to make it look like policymakers are addressing constituents' concerns. Global events such as these do not negate the hypothesis, but they do pose a confounding factor which should be taken into account by those advocating for policy change.

#### *Directions for Future Research*

To more fully understand the importance of shifts in public opinion, expanding the time frame of the study and polling during non-election years could provide more clarity to the connection between public opinion and policy. Expanding the time frame as far back as the 1940s and as far forward as present day would provide a more robust analysis of change over time and throughout different political climates.

Along the same lines of suggesting additional data to aid analysis, assessing state-level data on both public opinion and policy would also show which states wield the most leverage in

the immigration debate. These data can be used to show where in the United States the issue of immigration is the most salient, and how shifts of public opinion affect both state and federal immigration policy.

Beyond data availability, studying the influence of charismatic leaders on public opinion can shed light on what causes shifts in public opinion and how it can be manipulated to influence policy. Charismatic figures like Former President Donald Trump, Governor Greg Abbott, Tucker Carlson, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, or Senator Bernie Sanders can influence public opinion with their rhetoric and the policies for which they advocate. These individuals are public figures with large, devoted followings, so their endorsement of a policy stance greatly influences their followers' beliefs. By accounting for these figures and those with similar personalities and clout, the study would account for another confounding factor which may influence policy development.

## **Conclusion**

When assessing the differential effects of pro- and anti-immigration public opinion on immigration in the United States, public opinion which supports immigration restriction is more likely to translate into a larger number of policies. Liberal policies are implemented following pro-immigration shifts in aggregate opinion, but fewer policies are enacted during these times than are during periods following anti-immigration shifts. This connection only occurs when sizable shifts in public opinion occur, indicating immigration is a salient issue drawing significant public attention at a specific time. Shifts in public opinion may occur for a multitude of reasons, but in a liberal democracy, opinion shifts are likely to result in policy change.

These findings are important for those who want to change policy. Policy change is facilitated when there are large shifts in public opinion. If advocates understand this connection,

they can act to influence public opinion and build support for their cause through strategic rhetorical framing of immigration. They can also work to undermine their opponents more efficiently if they understand when upcoming policy changes are likely to occur.

With growing anti-immigrant rhetoric perpetuated by elected officials in power, public opinion of immigration is growing more restrictionist. Immigrants are criminalized and borders are militarized to perpetuate the political goals of anti-immigrant activists and elected officials. Those who support immigration need to resist this rhetoric and fight to change prevailing xenophobic attitudes toward immigrants. Immigration will continue to increase, and the United States and every other country needs to develop policy structures to meet the needs of all people within and traveling to its borders.

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## Appendix

### *Appendix 1. Distribution of Responses to Variables*

Table 1. Distribution of Immigration Public Opinion Responses

1 (increase immigration)	2 (remain the same)	3 (decrease immigration)
4655	10897	11761

Table 2. Distribution of Policy Change

1 (less restrictive)	2 (remain the same)	3 (more restrictive)
29	2	54

### *Appendix 2. Data Distribution by Year*

DEMIG Policy Data Totals by Year

Year	1 (less restrictive)	2 (remain the same)	3 (more restrictive)
1992	2	-	-
1993	-	-	1
1994	3	-	6
1995	-	-	1
1996	-	1	13
1997	2	-	-
1998	2	-	-
1999	1	-	-
2000	4	-	-
2001	2	-	2
2002	2	-	3
2003	1	-	2
2004	3	-	3
2005	3	1	7
2006	-	-	1
2007	-	-	8
2008	-	-	-
2009	1	-	-
2010	1	-	5
2011	1	-	2
2012	1	-	-
2013	-	-	-
Total	29	2	54

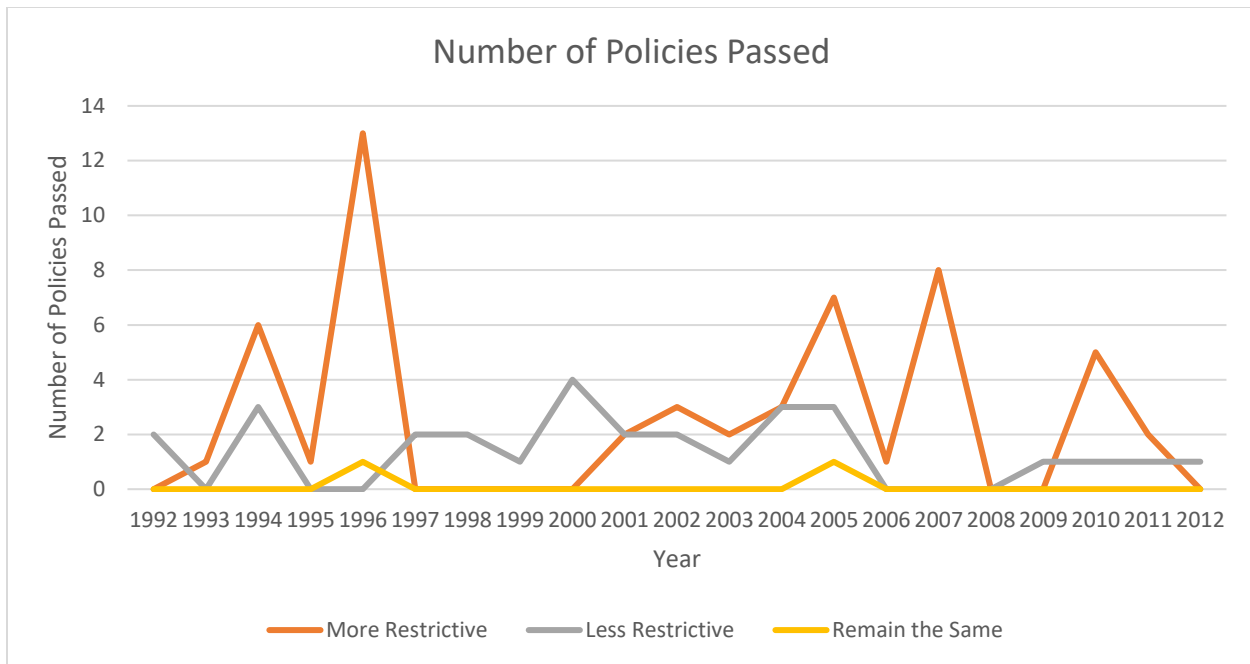


Figure A2a. The number of immigration-related policies passed in each year of the study based on their level of restrictiveness compared to previous policies or standards, as per the Determinants of Migration dataset.

### Appendix 3. Distribution of Public Opinion Over Time

#### ANES Data Totals by Year

Year	1 (increase immigration)	2 (remain the same)	3 (decrease immigration)	Average
1992	174	937	1057	2.41
1994	94	507	1129	2.60
1996	79	557	863	2.52
1998	135	496	614	2.38
2000	172	785	785	2.35
2004	106	450	491	2.36
2008	302	868	891	2.28
2012	772	2318	2300	2.28
2016	585	1442	1594	2.27
2020	2236	3077	2037	1.97
Total	4655	10897	11761	2.34